#6 HIGH SCHOOL REPORT CARD

Lending schools a helping hand

The sixth annual Atlantic Institute for Market Studies report card of the region's high schools kick-starts our annual education issue. Last year, we challenged the business community to show us ways they are helping to make schools better. We salute a few inspirational examples: Saint John's award-winning Partners Assisting Local Schools program is a particular case in point.

SPECIAL REPORT ON EDUCATION

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Why a report card, and what does it say

BY BOBBY O'KEEFE

In 2007 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released not only the latest round of international testing results but also an in-depth analysis of the factors that impacted those results around the world. They found a direct link between a country's achievement on the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) and the publication of performance results at the school level. The performance improvement was significant even when socio-economic and demographic variables were considered. Coming six years after AIMS launched its Atlantic High School Report Card, the OECD report is a vindication of our analysis that the more the public knows, the better schools will get.

Making performance data publicly available helps schools focus on what is important: the educational outcomes of students. This, in turn, helps schools thrive in an environment of increasing public scrutiny and expanding competition from private schools—which incidentally, is another factor PISA found to improve performance on its assessment. The more schools have to compete for students within a school system, the better those systems do on PISA tests, even when socio-economic and demographic variables are taken into consideration.

How well have Atlantic Canadian jurisdictions learned these two critical lessons? Not well at all. No province in this region offers publicly funded school choice, and while the opportunity to make "out of boundary" transfers between two public schools does theoretically exist, it cannot be described as an easy option for students or parents. Publicly funded choice is available in every other province in the country. In fact, as the OECD predicted, in Canada, as the amount of available choice goes up, so too does student achievement (a relationship that does not exist between student achievement and just spending more money on schools).

On the data side, things are looking up. Newfoundland and Labrador provides one of the widest sets of measures in the region and this year sees the addition of one more new measure: participation in university-preparatory courses. This openness is reflected in Newfoundland and Labrador's slow rise out of the cellar on international tests; it now leads this entire region in student performance.

Prince Edward Island still doesn't have provincial exams at the high school level, but it has taken steps to improve assessment and reporting of student achievement elsewhere. In 2006-07, P.E.I. administered its first set of provincial assessments in Grade 3 and Grade 9. Most importantly, the province also has decided to release the results of these assessments publicly and at the school level, meaning that parents, students, and the general public have easy access to this valuable information.

For New Brunswick's anglophone high schools, not only did the province cease the provincial exams but it also stopped collecting and reporting teacher-assigned grades. If teacher-assigned grades are going to be the primary assessment tool in New Brunswick high schools, then the OECD report tells us that those results must be available to the public. Unlike anglophone high schools in New Brunswick, high schools in the New Brunswick francophone system still have provincial examinations in both math and language arts. Similarly, the francophone system also collects and reports teacher assigned grades in these subject areas.

Two years ago, a ruling by Nova Scotia's Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Review Office confirmed that the release of student-achievement data was in the public interest. Regrettably, in some school boards the public is still waiting for school-by-school reporting.

PROVINCIAL SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SUMMARIES

NEW BRUNSWICK ANGLOPHONE

Grand Manan Community School is this year's top school, despite a decline in its overall grade from an A to an A-. Kennebecasis Valley High School improved from a B to a B+ to take second place, while Fredericton High School maintained its third-place ranking. Saint John High School improved from a B- to a B+ to take fourth place. Other notable improvements include Sir James Dunn Academy (C to B-) and Chipman Forest Avenue School (C- to B-).

Schools with marked declines include North & South Esk Regional High School from a B+ to a B- and Harvey High School from a B- to a C-. A few schools, including last year's top school, Upper Miramichi Regional High School in Boiestown, were unable to be ranked because of insufficient data from post-secondary institutions.

NEW BRUNSWICK FRANCOPHONE

Grades remained relatively consistent for all schools this year, with only École Marie-Gaétane, the jurisdiction's top school, changing by more than one grade level. Despite its overall grade falling from an A+ to an A-, for the second year École Marie-Gaétane in Kedgwick maintained its first-place standing. École Sainte-Anne in Fredericton ranked second with a B+ overall, improving from a B last year. Polyvalente A.-J.–Savoie in Saint-Quentin maintained both its B+ grade and third-place ranking.

NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

Gonzaga High School is the top-ranked school in Newfoundland and Labrador, maintaining its B+ grade. J.D. Olds Collegiate in Twillingate improved from a B to a B+ and was the second-place school in the province. Bay d'Espoir Academy earned a B+ and third place after not receiving a final grade last year (it had been missing a post-secondary achievement score).

Two schools showed improvement of more than one grade

about our schools?

level, with Appalachia High School improving from a C- to a C+ and Holy Heart High School in St. John's rising from a C+ to a B. Two schools also saw their overall grade fall by more than one grade level. Last year's top school, Dorset Collegiate, saw its grade fall from an A- to a B, and Templeton Academy in Meadows went from a B+ to a B-.

NOVA SCOTIA

Following the closing of Queen Elizabeth High School in Halifax, last year's top-ranked school, we were assured of a new school at the top of the rankings. Cape Breton Highlands Academy in Terre Noire jumped from third place in RC5 to take over the No. 1 spot in the province, maintaining an A-. Cape Breton Highlands was the only school in Nova Scotia to achieve an A, with Charles P. Allen in Bedford maintaining its B+ from last year to claim second spot in the rankings. Dalbrae Academy in Southwest Mabou saw its grade drop from an A- to a B+ but still finished third overall.

Several schools saw improvements of two grade levels. Rankin School of the Narrows and Pictou Academy–Dr. T. McCulloch School both improved from a C+ to a B. Canso Academy and Annapolis West Education Centre also improved by two grade levels (both C to B-). Springhill Junior–Senior High School was the only school to see its grade decline more than two levels, falling from a B- to a C-.

Due to an insufficient number of students attending post-secondary institutions, we were unable to award final grades to five schools that received grades in RC5, including last year's second-place school, Island Consolidated in Freeport. We are also unable to award final grades to schools in Conseil scolaire acadien provincial, since schools in this board don't write exams in as many subject areas as the anglophone school boards.

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

For the third consecutive year, Souris Regional High School maintained its standing as the top school in the province, despite its overall grade falling from an A- to a B+. Kensington Intermediate Senior High had the largest grade improvement from last year's report card, improving two grade levels from a C to a B-.

It's up to you

You can play an important role in making our schools better. Read, discuss, and use the performance data found in the Report Card insert in this edition of *Progress*, or the AIMS online Report Card at *www.aims.ca*, to better understand what is going on inside our schools. Consider more than just the final grade for any school; the data make it possible to identify weaknesses for even the strongest schools to work on and to find strengths for those with lower grades to build from. We invite you to contact AIMS about coming to your school or community to discuss the Report Card and how it can be used to improve the education your school provides. Working together, we can make a difference.

Bobby O'Keefe (bobbyokeefe@aims.ca) *is a senior policy analyst at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies.*

Better blueberries

BY CHARLES CIRTWILL

As we were finishing this year's Atlantic High School Report Card, one of my colleagues had the opportunity to attend a speech given by a prominent member of the education community. It was a primarily corporate audience, and the talk was entitled "Beyond the Blueberry Story." As you would expect, the speech started with the blueberry story. I feel that it bears repeating because it goes to the heart of the ongoing challenge that the business and education communities have in finding common ground.

The story goes like this: one day a senior businessperson stood up to preach to an audience of educators about all of the ills of poor management that plague the education system. His message could be summed up by that famous phrase: "If I ran my company this way, I would be out of business." After he finished, a teacher from the audience stood up to raise a few clarifying points.

As it turns out, the entrepreneur was a maker of ice cream, and one of his company's most popular flavours was blueberry. So the teacher's first question was, "Do you make good ice cream?" To which he replied, "Yes, the very best." That was followed by: "And you only use the very best ingredients?" Again, the obvious answer: "Nothing but." Finally, the kicker: "What do you do if you get a bad batch of blueberries?" Immediately and without hesitation: "We throw them out."

"Well, we can't throw out the bad kids," said the teacher, who then promptly sat down.

Game, set, match. Right?

Wrong.

The teacher missed the point entirely. In the appropriate business analogy, the kids are not the ingredient, they are the end product: the world's best ice cream. Who, then, are the blueberries? If anything, they could be the teachers. Or the blueberries could equally be you and me, either as parents or taxpayers. The blueberries could also be government policy-makers or politicians, union leaders, university professors, or school principals. The blueberries could be any of the myriad people, places, or things that are invested into the education of a child. The only thing we can know for certain is that the blueberries are not the kids.

Furthermore, the idea that every bad corporate input can be just tossed aside is ridiculous. Businesspeople can undoubtedly regale us all with stories of taking what they had to work with and making it better, including investing scarce funds in technology, training, or facilities; finding new ways to use the same human and physical capital to deliver better results; and getting the incentives right so waste is minimized and even marginal improvements breed significant results.

That's the point missed by the teacher in the story, and others who repeat it, such as our education system stakeholder. Good systems, whether in education or business, are designed to make the best of any situation. What education can learn from business has everything to do with getting the systems and incentives right. The objective is the best outcome, every time. No successful entrepreneur would ever ask, "Is that good enough?" Neither should any successful education system.

Businesspeople who want to lend a hand in education, and educators who are serious about treating them as partners, should take this to heart: Good partnerships are based on mutual respect and complementary skills.

We all have something valuable to contribute to improving our education system, but until we put in place a system that allows us to act on that mix of skills and experience, we will not progress. This translates into mediocre ice cream most of the time, when what we want is the very best, every time. To achieve that, all of the blueberries need to smarten up.

Toby Bourque and Barbara Creamer are two of more than 200 volunteers and school staff who are working together under the PALS banner.

SANDOR FIZLI

In for the long haul

Eight years ago, a few Saint John business leaders got active about poverty in their native city. Where did they start? In their own neighbourhoods. Their legacy is a partnership program that matches businesses with schools in need. It has garnered international attention, and the rest of New Brunswick is taking notice

BY ANDY PEDERSEN

As director of operations for Base Engineering Inc., a firm that has cornered the North American market for industrial wireless technology, engineer Toby Bourque has attended many memorable meetings. But this particular one, in which he's sitting in an undersized chair and surrounded by blackboards and children's art, might turn out to be the most meaningful of his life. "Where I am in my career and where I am in my company," he says, "I have enough influence that I can say, 'I'm going to help.' "

Bourque is inside a classroom at Glen Falls

If you want to stay in business you had better plan to stay sharp; lose focus and you're done. Especially if you're out in front where there's no one to show you the way and there's always someone coming up fast. It takes a well-managed business to be flexible enough, and fast enough to take on today's challenging markets. For me, yesterday's business is a thing of the past. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Good just isn't good enough. *Let's talk.*

Michael Anaka
Managing Partner, Maritimes
902 491 7442
michael.t.anaka@ca.pwc.com

www.pwc.com/ca/pcs

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Elementary, the school right next door to his company's offices in east Saint John, N.B. Though he has driven by the school thousands of times—coming to work and, before that, coming into town from the nearby suburb where he grew up—it's the first time he has stepped inside. "I go by this school every day," he says. "Some days I think, 'Why do I always feel bad driving by?' "

Glen Falls is on the fringe of one the city's more vulnerable neighbourhoods, and its resources are stretched agonizingly thin. Like similar schools all over, many of its students are needful of extra attention and care. Worse, the surrounding tax base is small, so while it needs more resources than schools in more affluent parts of the city, it gets less. From the outside, with its swampy field and rusting roof, Bourque could see that it was struggling. "There's so much poverty in this city," he says. "I've realized that if I don't step up and try to do something, then I'm as at fault as anybody else."

Once inside, Bourque is conscious of the level of care and concern shown for the students. Sitting across the table is Barbara Creamer, the principal of Glen Falls. Practical and plainspoken, she listens while Bourque talks about engaging students in the joys of science and inspiring them to develop an interest in engineering and technology.

Creamer regards him from behind her blue-rimmed glasses. Finally, she leans forward. "We would love to have some of your employees work with our children, Toby," she says. "But kids aren't for everyone. We've seen our share of groups come through here, but after a while they leave. We're the ones left to pick up the pieces."

This is the dilemma facing schools when well-meaning people come knocking. It takes time and effort to integrate volunteers, but you can never be sure how long their energy and commitment will last. And if it ebbs, as it often does for a variety of reasons, you're left with a void that is financial, operational, and, worst, emotional. "If there's damage," says Creamer, "it can take us a long time to fix it. The right intentions are there, but in the past, the right infrastructure wasn't. Companies got scared and overwhelmed, and they'd burn out."

It's a potentially sour moment—one that might keep Bourque from offering the help he wants to give, and Creamer from receiving the help she so desperately needs. But there's another person sitting at the table: Deborah Fisher. And as she often does, she's smiling. "We're going to take this slow," says Fisher. "We don't rush anybody into anything."

Toby Bourque: "We've got some of the greatest minds in the world, and they're right next door."

SANDOR FIZLI

PLANTING THE SEED

Fisher is one of the driving forces behind PALS, or Partners Assisting Local Schools. It's a made-in-Saint John program that, over the past seven years, has been quietly complementing the city's public education system by forging powerful links between individual schools, businesses, and local community groups nearby. In the nine schools in which PALS has been active, there have been remarkable results: rising grades, fewer dropouts, and markedly increased school and community spirit. In the long run, it could actually help break the cycle of poverty that has gripped this city. And it could do the same in towns and cities right across Atlantic Canada. "The whole idea is that it's adoptable and adaptable," says Fisher. "If you take it step by step, and you build real relationships between schools and their communities, they're both going to flourish."

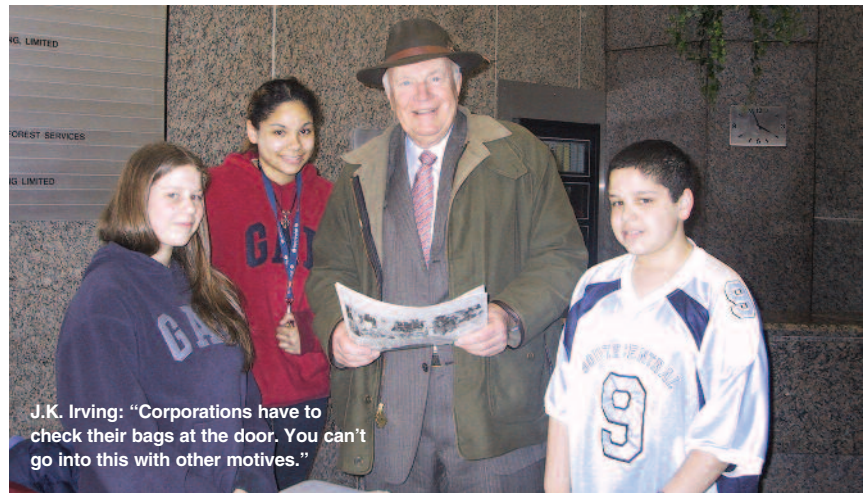
Like many of the most successful ventures that have emerged from Saint John, this one has an Irving at its heart. One afternoon eight years ago, J.K. Irving was looking out the window from his office tower on the downtown's east side. One of K.C.'s three sons, the 80-year-old is still active in business as the president and CEO of J.D. Irving Limited (JDI), which has interests in forestry, transportation, and retail.

Irving has worked a long career in this city, and

"If you take it step by step, and you build real relationships between schools and their communities, they're both going to flourish" **— Deborah Fisher, Partners Assisting Local Schools**

monuments to his family's success pepper the landscape: The *Telegraph-Journal*, the shipyard, the pulp mill, and the refinery. But on this particular day, Irving wasn't thinking about prosperity; he was reflecting on poverty and the alarming extent to which it had affected Saint John. Recent statistics showed that it had become one of the poorest cities in the country; almost half of its families were earning less than $30,000 a year. The divorce rate was an astonishing 40% higher than the national average, and most families had only one parent, usually a mother. More than 35% of the homes needed significant repair. Literacy rates were dropping. Teen-pregnancy rates were rising.

Irving was familiar with those figures thanks to a man named Bill Gale. Then the head of RBC for New Brunswick, Gale was the driving force behind the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI) and had recently paid Irving a visit. He asked Irving to attend a meeting with a group of local business leaders to discuss the issue of poverty in the city.



J.K. Irving: "Corporations have to check their bags at the door. You can't go into this with other motives."

Poverty was such an insidious problem, after all—where to even start thinking about how to fix it? How could businesses, even large ones, tackle such a massive challenge? After the group had several meetings, it commissioned a study by Deloitte to determine the underlying causes of poverty in the city. One recommendation supported targeting interventions with young children to

make a generational change in the socio-economic status.

So looking out his office window that day, and reflecting on the Deloitte report, Irving focused his attention on the low-slung brick building next door: Prince Charles School. Offering classes from kindergarten to Grade 8, most of its students came from one of the most vulnerable areas in Saint John. A plan began to take shape in his imagination. "Someone told me that by the time young people are in Grade 8, the die has been cast," says Irving. "You have an opportunity for change before that, but after that it becomes very difficult to make changes."

But Prince Charles could only afford its students the most basic of educations. "They were unable to provide many of the extras that more affluent schools offer," Irving recalls. "No sports. No art. No music." More was needed that could inspire the students, show them the possibilities of life, and give them goals and dreams to work toward. Irving called Wayne Wolfe into his office. The head of the pulp-and-paper division, Wolfe is one of his most trusted advisors. Irving pointed down at the school and said, "Wayne, do you suppose we could help make a change down there?"

Soon afterward, the two of them were sitting in the office of Bev MacDonald, the director of education for the local school board. They told her they wanted to help. "She sat there, quite serious, just looking at us," Irving recalls. At the end of the meeting, MacDonald was positive about the possibilities of a partnership. Both she and Irving agreed that the best idea was to go about everything quietly, to make sure a successful working model could be developed.

It was crucial from the beginning that guidelines be established. "Corporations have to check their bags at the door," says Irving. "You can't go into this with other motives." Mary Keith, JDI's vice-president of communications, nods her head vigorously. "It's not about getting your logo into schools," says Keith. "It's not sponsorship. It's partnership."

To work as a liaison between the company and the school, Irving brought in Deborah Fisher. A long-time teacher from Moncton, she had already worked with the Department of Education and his company before, helping design materials about the forestry industry for the province's students. She and MacDonald talked to teachers and administrators at Prince Charles and drafted a list of things the school needed. The list focused on two types of resources: human and financial. Money was needed for new books for the library, musical instruments, sports uniforms, and support for the breakfast program.

But what the school needed most of all was volunteers, people to mentor the

Irving spread the word throughout JDI: anybody who wanted to volunteer one hour a week at the school could do so on company time. Jim Jordan, a forester who had risen through the ranks to become JDI's VP of purchasing, signed up immediately

students at the school, not just to help with their class work but also with their life skills. So Irving spread the word throughout JDI: anybody who wanted to volunteer one hour a week at the school could do so on company time. Jim Jordan signed up immediately. A forester who had risen through the ranks to become Irving's vice-president of purchasing, he had always enjoyed speaking at schools and teaching kids about trees, but he had no idea how much his life was about to change when he met Matt, the boy he had been assigned to mentor.

"He looked like any 10-year-old boy," Jordan recalls of their first meeting seven years ago. "Full of energy. He had a hard time sitting still." At first, neither of them knew what to say, so they sat in silence for three or four minutes. Jordan asked Matt what sports he liked. His response: basketball. A half hour later, after doing a little schoolwork, the two of them were on the court. "Seeing this 40ish guy in a dress shirt and tie running around on the court with a 10-year-old," says Jordan. "The other kids found that pretty funny."

But Matt enjoyed himself, and a connection was forged. With Jordan's encouragement and support ever since, Matt's grades have improved and his ambitions have blossomed: when he graduates from high school next year, he wants to continue his education toward getting a high-tech industrial job. "He needed to choose a certain path in life," says Jordan. "He could have chosen a different path, there's no doubt about that. But he chose a path with a future, and we supported his choice."

Their relationship has had real meaning for Jordan too. "He shared

things with me, but I shared things with him too," he says. "Now he's involved with my family. We see each other every Saturday. We spend time together, and he spends time with my kids. Now he's helping them with their homework. He's become an older brother to them."

JDI became involved with Prince Charles slowly and quietly; it seemed the best strategy to ensure the project's success. Seven years later, few could have foreseen just how successful it would be; dozens of Irving's employees now help out at the school. They have logged more than 14,000 volunteer hours, everything from mentoring individual students to coaching sports teams. Their efforts aren't all strictly academic either; one group of young women from the accounting department leads weekly scrapbooking classes during the lunch hour.

As the company's involvement grew, word of the program spread. Other businesses and organizations wanted to help too, and Prince Charles now has over 140 partners volunteering under the PALS banner; together with a dedicated school staff, they have all helped transform the school. Literacy rates are rising, and vandalism has decreased. Last year, for the first time in recent memory, more than half of the students who went through Prince Charles graduated from high school. A rising tide lifts all boats, and while the school still faces significant challenges, everything at the school seems to be improving. "Right down to the general demeanour of the children," says acting principal Lynn Rector. "It's had an effect on the atmosphere of the entire school."

Emboldened by their success at Prince Charles, the PALS stakeholders went public a couple of years ago. They're now operating in eight other schools in the city, supported by more than 50 businesses and organizations, ranging from small family concerns to such giants as Aliant, the Atlantic Health Sciences Corporation, and the City of Saint John. The program is set to start next school year at three more Saint John schools. They won't be lacking for businesses eager to take part; there are almost 20 on the waiting list.

The program has also caught the eyes and imaginations of teachers and education officials outside Saint John. PALS representatives have spoken to other school districts across the province that are interested in setting up programs of their own. The provincial government is keen to spread the word too. "You've blown us away," said Gary Wood, the Department of Education's director of strategic initiatives, during a recent PALS breakfast event. "You are the people who are driving this, and we want to go along for the ride."

The PALS program doesn't impose pre-made solutions in schools. Rather, it asks the schools what they need and then tries to find businesses that can help—there are almost 20 on the waiting list

WATCHING IT GROW

Back at Glen Falls Elementary, Bourque and Creamer are getting down to specifics. One of the keys to PALS's success has been the fact that it doesn't impose pre-made solutions on its schools. Rather, it asks the schools what they need and then tries to find businesses that can help. In Creamer, Glen Falls has an active principal who seeks funding and program assistance from a variety of sources. "We write an incredible number of funding applications, and we get most of the ones we apply for," says Bourque. "We can help you with that." Creamer puts her hand to her chest and smiles. "My heart be still," she says. Fisher is smiling, and now so is Bourque.

Other ideas follow: help with the school's Chicken Noodle Club lunch program, snowboarding and mountain-biking field trips, school yard improvement ("It's barren right now. It's a tragedy children have to play out there. We're working on naturalizing it," says Creamer), and tours of Base Engineering's labs. "We've got some of the greatest minds in the world, and they're right next door," says Bourque. "For any of your kids who might be interested in that kind of thing, it's the epitome of real-world science."

Time flies as they chat excitedly, and suddenly Creamer realizes that she has to go to another meeting. They exchange warm handshakes; another partnership has been born. "We will never rush you, because we want you here for the long-term," she says. "I'll come and go, Debbie will come and go, and you'll come and go. But we want to weave your company in with the fabric of this school."

A demographic time bomb

A good debate about post-secondary education is healthy

Just as J.K. Irving is changing the face of grade-school education in Saint John, Andrew Oland is hoping to change the face of post-secondary education in the city. The president of Moosehead Breweries Ltd. and the vice-chair of the Saint John Board of Trade, Oland is pushing the city's community college and university to tailor their programs to address the looming labour shortage.

"The demographic time bomb that's about to hit Atlantic Canada can't be underestimated," says Oland. He pulls out a graph with two lines; one shows the workforce plunging with the impending baby boomer retirements, while the other falls slowly, showing the province's eroding population. He points to the spot where the two lines cross, which is happening right now: "This is where we're in trouble."

Not only are there suddenly fewer workers than the economy needs, but Saint John is also facing considerable challenges in attracting workers from afar. "I'm not a big believer that we'll be able to bring a lot of people back," says Oland. "Right now we have to focus on keeping people here." One of the keys, he says, will be convincing the city's post-secondary institutions to the city's main industries: energy, health, entrepreneurship, and environmental remediation. If done properly, they will train local students for local jobs. If done well, they could attract outside students and faculty and help boost the population.

To that end, Oland has spent last year championing a radical plan that included an outright merger of the city's community college and the University of New Brunswick Saint John's campus (UNBSJ). The new school, which he calls the Institute of Knowledge and Technology, would gear its courses toward skills desirable to local industry. Courses that aren't pulling their economic weight, such as the university's bachelor of arts, would be dumped. "We've had a system that was trying to be all things to all people," says Oland, "and it's just not sustainable."

Oland's provocative vision has been divisive; it has gained considerable momentum within the business community but has garnered scorn from the ivory tower, prompting a vocal demonstration on the UNBSJ campus. In early February, New Brunswick Premier Shawn Graham weighed in on the issue. During his annual sate-of-the-province address, Graham said that he had decided that UNBSJ would remain independent and keep its liberal arts program.

But Oland doesn't consider that a defeat, pointing out that the premier also announced administrative changes that would make the community college more responsive to the needs of local industry. "We're moving in the right direction," he says. "There are a lot of stakeholders and a lot of issues to take into consideration. The important thing is that there's now a good healthy debate underway." **— A.P.**

Rolling up her sleeves

Education activist Cheryl Hodder wants to see an education system that builds on strengths, but she stresses the importance of finding a clear focus and putting effective leaders at the helm

Cheryl Hodder: "There needs to be an overall vision, and that has to be tied to economic development."

BY MEREDITH DAULT

The fact that lawyer Cheryl Hodder is a coal miner's daughter is not, in itself, unusual. Still, even she seems conscious of the fact that her declaration of origin feels at odds with her surroundings. Seated in a stark meeting room at McInnes Cooper's stylish new Halifax law office where she is a partner, Hodder reflects on an upbringing that encouraged academic success "Growing up I was always told by my parents that education was vitally important," she says simply.

So it is perhaps Hodder's own experience in the public school system—one that rewards hard work while turning a blind eye to economic status—that helps explain her passion for education reform, particularly as it relates to the role of the business community. She was recently named chair of the Education and Training Committee of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce, a new team designed to engage business leaders to get involved in education. The group was formed after a task force found that more than 60% of Chamber members felt the current education system did an inadequate job of preparing students for the workforce.

"There are wonderful things going on in classrooms all over this province," says Hodder, "but for Nova Scotia to reach its fullest potential, there really needs to be an overall vision, and that has to be tied to economic development." Hodder views the committee as a facilitator of dialogue among stakeholders with the common goal of graduating students who not only have better literacy and numeracy skills (along with a more transparent means of evaluating them) but who are also well-rounded, community-minded citizens. "We believe the business community should be actively involved and should roll up their sleeves," says Hodder, "instead of just being critics."

But if anyone has earned the right to criticize the current education system, it is Hodder. Before acquiring her law degree from the University of New Brunswick, she spent four years teaching high school in Barrington Passage, N.S., even trying her hand at special education. She has also taught adults law at Dalhousie and Saint Mary's universities. Her current practice focuses on education law, and she works closely with a variety of institutions, from

universities to community colleges. "Some of the most rewarding professional experiences I've ever had have been in the realm of education," she says.

It's clear that Hodder is intent on bringing that same positive energy to her new post. And the people she has recruited to work with her—an impressive roster of experienced executives—are just as passionate. "We want it to be constructive," she says, stressing her committee's desire to make changes to the current education system. "It's a combination of having a critical look at what is happening now, looking for a way to improve things, and finding ways to get there."

The first order of business is addressing the Halifax Regional School Board's current governance crisis (in 2006 the entire school board was fired by the province for being dysfunctional), especially with board elections on the horizon. "When a good relationship exists between a strong board and school administration there's a positive affect on student achievement," says Hodder, acknowledging that the current situation, particularly the lack of leadership, has reached a crisis point.

Hodder and her colleagues would also like to see more businesses working directly with young people, from elementary school and up, through such initiatives as co-operative work programs. Just back from an investigative trip to Calgary, where student achievement has been rising consistently thanks to strong leadership, Hodder describes a group of elementary school children who made a presentation at a school board meeting. "They were already speaking in leadership language," she says about a character building program where students studied different virtues each month. "It was so compelling. They were talking about taking responsibility, caring for others, and volunteering in the community."

Hodder is proud of her province and its resources, and she's confident that change can be implemented to build a stronger workforce and regional economy. "But we need a long-term vision," she says. "There are no quick fixes." Her own experience is proof enough of what she called "the transformative power" of education. "I don't want us to just be good," she says, without hesitating. "I want us to be great."

Class act

In a remote region where temperatures can dip as low as -40°C, Churchill Falls Labrador Corp. is attracting top-notch employees by offering their children a first-rate education

BY IAN GORMELY

When Ed Arnott was interviewing for the principal's position at Eric G. Lambert School in Churchill Falls, N.L., he didn't know what to expect. Churchill Falls, population 681, is a classic company town. The school, which is wholly owned and operated by the Churchill Falls Labrador Corp., a remote hydroelectric operation in the middle of the Labrador wilderness, delivers Newfoundland and Labrador's regular curriculum.

For the first time in his 32 years as an educator, Arnott would be accountable not to a government department but to a corporation. At the end of his job interview, one of the company managers asked if their questions were what Arnott had expected. He was surprised to find himself answering with a resounding yes. "They had done their homework," he says. "They really want the school to work."

In Churchill Falls, temperatures can drop into the low -40s, so to attract the top engineers and technicians to its operation, Churchill Falls Labrador Corp. needs to ensure there are incentives for potential employees to move their families there. One way is to offer an exemplary education, with all of the facilities and opportunities a student could need. "If we're missing something," says Arnott, "it's because we haven't thought of it yet."

Eric G. Lambert consistently ranks among the top schools in provincial testing, even though it has an enrolment of just 144 students.

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- ❍ Retail ❍ Wholesale
- ❍ Tourism/Travel ❍ Accommodation
- ❍ Transportation
- ❍ Other (please specify)_____

continued on next column

4. How many employees are in your organization?: (please check one)
❍ 1-10 ❍ 11-25 ❍ 26-50 ❍ 51-100
❍ 101-500 ❍ 501-1000 ❍ over 1000

5. Which best describes your job function? (please check one)
- ❍ Owner/Executive Management
- ❍ Senior Management
- ❍ Departmental Management
- ❍ Marketing Management
- ❍ Other (please specify) _____

6. The budget you manage is: (please check one)
❍ Under $100,000 ❍ $100,001 - $500,000
❍ $500,001 - $1,000,000 ❍ $1,000,001 - $5,000,000
❍ Greater than $5,000,000

7. Does your company export? ❍
import? ❍
both? ❍
neither? ❍ **(please check one)**

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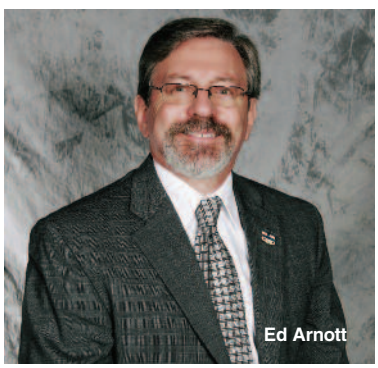
Progress

As Arnott discovered, a private school funded by corporate dollars can create an ideal learning environment for students, with top-notch facilities, low student-teacher ratios, and the flexibility to accommodate co-curricular activities such as the ROV Robotics club, French public-speaking club, and a wide range of sports clubs. He would also learn that it's also the ideal environment for educators to nurture what Arnott calls "the whole student," focusing on human development, not just academic achievement.

"It's an excellent school," says Oral Burry, Churchill Falls Labrador Corp.'s manager of production. He says the school's reputation was a factor in his decision to move his family to Churchill Falls from St. John's in 2001. His two children are now enrolled in kindergarten and Grade 3. The family returned to St. John's for a year and Burry found the differences between Eric G. Lambert and the capital's public


Ed Arnott

schools were palpable. "There were many things that we missed," he says, including the low student-teacher ratio and high quality of education. The Burrys have since moved back to Churchill Falls.

Arnott is a long-time advocate of education reform. In the past, he has pushed for an emphasis on external testing to determine where schools stand academically, but today he thinks the pendulum has swung too far in that direction. In his view, a focus on testing core subjects such as reading and math takes precedence over art, music, and physical education, which get pushed to the side or forgotten altogether.

On the issue of teacher accountability, Arnott believes that educators need to examine their motives for teaching. "Whoever said 'the unexamined life is not worth living' was a smart person," he says. "Teachers need to figure out if they're effective with their students, and if not, how they will move from being ineffective to effective." But the most important thing is for educators to decide if they really want to teach. "If you're not up for the job," he says, "you should get out."

Arnott is more than aware of how lucky his school is. "I wish our provincial government was able to do what Churchill Falls has done for every school in Newfoundland," he says. But you have to make the best out of whatever you're given. As educators, "we're meant to do a lot," he says. "It's an awesome responsibility."